

Here is Mt. Vesuvius

by Tara Laskowski

Here is Mt. Vesuvius: a fuzzy Technicolor photo dancing on the yellowed projection screen Mr. Keller pulled down dramatically over the blackboard. Mt. Vesuvius—destroyer of Pompeii, a big fat boiling pot of pus, fire and brimstone, buckets of lava brimming, pooling, collecting, melting everything in sight. Mr. Keller drones on—tectonic plates, magma, Naples and those Herculean gods, bronzed meatheads really, with their ripped arms and tiny loincloths that give the girls in class the giggles and remind my scrawny pale ass to cross "toga party" off my list of things to do.

Mr. Keller tells us about the dead people of Pompeii and how you can go there and still see them, blackened figures tilling their fields or frozen mid-run, their arms outstretched so that if you touched them they would crumble like dust. He asks us questions we don't have the answers to. What can we learn from this? What was their motivation? And why on Earth did they stay so long, even after they knew the lives they'd imagined were over?

Next to me sighs Kelli Ann (she spells her name like that, with a heart-shaped dot on that "i" like a deliberate flash of tit.) She twirls her pencil through curly blond hair and stares past me to those red hot boiling pockets of melted Earth that I expect to burn right through that projection screen. It makes me scratch my face, my own Vesuvius, the "natural disasters" Dr. Crater (I swear that's his name, too) says he can control and eliminate, though we've yet to see that happen. Instead the volcanoes form on top of one another, my face a complex system of bumps and valleys.

Dr. Crater's got skin as smooth as a superhero, and even Mr. Keller seems pretty decent looking for his age with his khaki pants, sweater vests and thick hair, so whenever either of them look at me in that way—that pitiful, thank-god-I'm-not-this-loser-kid glance—it

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throbs worse than the pizza bubbles on my cheeks and makes me want to shove their Tommy Bahama and Hilfiger ties down their skinny throats.

Neither Dr. Crater nor Mr. Keller know the dirty little secret about my parents or they might feel more sorry for me, sitting up in my bedroom with my iPod turned up high, textbook open to Pompeii, squeezing tubes of Noxzema and ClearSkin into little pastes like my own science experiment, while downstairs destroying their own civilization my parents leak in like static through Outkast: "*Hey ya, what about me, never again, Shake it like a Polaroid picture, you selfish bitch!*" and that's what it is, 17 years of marriage tuned out by a rapper guy.

Here are their questions: Will I live here or have to move between them like a vagrant with a Jansport backpack and a portable DVD player? Will they sell the vacation condo in Atlantic City and split the profits or will Dad keep renting it out and bringing his bottle blondes there on the weeknights? Will they ever find happiness again?

And here are mine: Are they going to keep taking me to the fancy Dr. Crater? Will the Accutane fuck with my hormones, giving me a high, squeaky voice to tell my troubles to some shrink? Will Kelli Ann—a real blonde, mind you—ever stop staring at that projection screen and look over at me? And honestly, who the hell gives a shit because one day my face is just going to erupt in a series of explosions so great it will ooze down and turn us all into ash, frozen burned figures that used to look like a family.

